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Teen struggles with food

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Story by Cinda Williams Chima
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Lisa Weiss grew up in a traditional Jewish household where food was a demonstration of love. So no one made too much of it when, by age 11, she began putting on weight.

By age 13, however, Lisa's weight had become a source of conflict between her and her family.

"I was a very rebellious, angry teenager," says Weiss, now 25. "I would do the opposite of what people told me." If her mother nagged her about ordering a corned beef sandwich, Weiss would order it double-stuffed and with fries.

Between feeling pressured at home and stressed by health issues, Weiss gained 70 pounds in one year.

Then the teasing began. Weiss, who lives in Solon, was tormented at school about her weight from the age of 13. She never told her parents, because she didn't want to admit the taunts were getting to her. Instead, Weiss continued to deny that she had a weight problem.

"I would look in the mirror and say, I'm curvy," she says. "The only thing that really bothered me was that I couldn't fit into clothes."

Weight stigma begins early, says Dr. Ellen Rome, head of adolescent medicine at the Cleveland Clinic.

"If you have an overweight 8-year-old in the office, that 8-year-old has already been teased," Rome says.

Kids and teens with weight issues often experience body image and self-esteem problems, says Dr. Robert Needlman, a behavioral pediatrician at MetroHealth Medical Center. He directs MetroHealth's Nutrition, Exercise and Wellness program for kids ages 3 to 18.

Needlman sees differences in image problems between boys and girls.

"Boys have less pressure on them to be attractive, but they have a lot of pressure to be athletic," Needlman says. "For the boys who are really overweight, the rounded figure of a really obese boy is less masculine-looking."

Weiss believes her weight gain resulted from poor diet and a lack of activity.

"When I got into watching TV and playing video games, that took over," she says. "I would come home from school and eat a large bowl of Reese's peanut butter puff cereal before dinner. Both my parents worked, so we ate takeout almost every night. I grew up eating Little Caesars pizza by the foot and Chinese takeout."

Finally, her mother took her to a dietitian when she was 15.

"I was there because my mom was making me," Weiss says. "I felt stigmatized. I would lie every week in my little green food diary book. "

The book is a tool used by Shapedown, a national weight loss program for children and teens, which didn't work for Weiss. She just wasn't ready.

The outside mirrors

what's within

Strains in parent-adolescent relationships often surface in the form of weight issues. And not all kids are ready to make a change to a healthier lifestyle, says Needl man.

"In many cases, overweight is a symptom of depression or a cause of depression," says Needl man. "Other kids are healthy emotionally but simply eat too much of the wrong kinds of foods and don't move around enough.

"The groundwork for any kind of change is the recognition that something is not the way it should be. The beginning interview is always centered on identifying the reasons that kids want to change or not -- or parents want to change or not."

The summer after her senior year in high school, Weiss began to work out with a friend at the Jewish Community Center. She lost about 10 pounds. But the real turning point was unsolicited advice Weiss received from a physically fit woman she met on a graduation trip to Israel.

"You should go on the Zone diet. I lost a lot of weight on that," the woman told her.

Weiss says she knew the woman was being helpful, but the words stung. Somehow the observation of a stranger resonated in a way advice from family and friends had not.

Weiss began following a modified Zone diet, aiming for a balance of carbohydrates, protein and fat. For the rest of that summer, she exercised six days a week. Once away at college, she stuck to her plan and continued to lose weight while those around her struggled to avoid the freshman 15.

"I would get salad with chicken and a roll, cottage cheese with fruit or pasta with a piece of chicken," she says.

And she continued to work out.

"I started running, and one of the happiest days of my life was being able to run a mile."

In her first year of college, Weiss lost 60 pounds. Eventually, she went from a high weight of 235 pounds to a low of 140 pounds. Today, at 5 feet 7, she weighs about 145 pounds, maintaining a total loss of 90 pounds over the past five years.

Starting early, staying on top

Lisa Weiss beat the odds in many ways. Eight-to-12-year-olds are usually more successful in weight loss than teens who have already reached their adult height, says Cleveland Clinic's Rome. It's easier to change family behaviors at younger ages, and parental influence is more effective.

In very overweight teens, it's not just a matter of preventing further weight gain. Achieving a healthy weight requires weight loss, plus a change in eating and activity habits.

Extremely overweight teens often require more aggressive intervention. Cleveland Clinic offers a group weight-management program in Independence called Fit Youth, which the Clinic's Web site describes as "a family weight control program . . . for children who are serious about wanting to lose weight. In addition to losing weight, the program will help your child develop new eating and exercise habits." The Clinic also offers teen clients an intensive high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet, a kind of medically monitored Atkins diet, says Rome.

"We see kids losing 30-50 pounds on this diet, 20-30 pounds a month," she says.

Rome also does preoperative evaluations for teens scheduled for bariatric (weight loss) surgery.

But weight loss alone doesn't always result in a change in self- image. Weiss admits she's still confused

about the way she looks.

"How you were treated as a child molds the way you feel about yourself," she says. "I'm still trying to be comfortable in the skin I'm in."

Weiss was one of more than 100 teens interviewed by dietitian Anne Fletcher for her book, "Weight Loss Confidential" (Houghton-Mifflin, 2006). To teens struggling with weight, she emphasizes the importance of educating themselves and accepting responsibility for their own health.

"Take your future in your own hands," she says.

It's not all about deprivation, she says.

Today, Weiss describes herself as a "clotheshorse." She believes in treats, whether Hershey's kisses or new clothes.

She still works hard at keeping the weight off. She exercises three to four times a week, combining strength training and cardio. She suggests finding an activity you enjoy that you can do on a regular basis.

And she monitors her weight, giving herself a five-pound leeway before she takes action. She routinely cuts restaurant portions in half and packages the rest to take home.

"I know what a real portion size is. I learned that from dietitians," she says.

"One thing I learned about food is that it will still be there tomorrow. I don't have to have it all right now."

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of the University of Akron. Her column runs on alternating weeks in Taste. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to food@plaind.com

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